Jonathan Hoefler on Type Design

Jonathan Hoefler is a typeface designer and an armchair type historian whose New York studio, the Hoefler Type Foundry, specializes in the design of original typefaces. Hoefler's publishing work includes original typeface designs for *Rolling Stone, Harper's Bazaar,* the *New York Times Magazine, Sports Illustrated,* and Condé Nast; his corporate work includes the Hoefler Text family of type for Apple Computer, now appearing on computers everywhere as part of the Macintosh operating system. His work has been exhibited internationally and is included in the permanent collection of the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum (Smithsonian Institution) in New York. The Hoefler Type Foundry publishes *Muse,* a type specimen book appearing periodically and available online at *www.typography.com.*

You began to design professionally when you were still in high school. How did you become a type designer?

I got involved in graphic design through caring about typography and finding that there wasn't anywhere I could do a degree program in type. So I took a year off from college to figure out what I should be doing, during which I worked for the Roger Black Studio on *Smart* magazine and finally at the Font Bureau doing more things related to font design.

Where did this impulse come from?

Some people are attuned to sports or fashion—but one of the reasons is that I've always liked to draw. I've always liked to use computers as well, and do programming. When the Macintosh came out in 1984, it offered me a tool to conduct graphic design in a way that was accessible to me as a teenager.

You were just fourteen. Where did you have access to this?

My neighbor had one. I used to go and feed his cats and use his computer. I could get my feet wet in what was involved with making images. Incidentally, when I was in high school my knowledge of what graphic design entailed probably had more to do with what commercial art was like in the 1930s. I thought it meant doing drawings of tail fins for Detroit. It didn't have to do with typeface design or even the use of type.

In addition to the computer, what were some of your early influences?

Spy magazine was one of the first artifacts that made me aware that typography can be the key ingredient in the design of a publication. I was aware of the way type was being used there more than in any other publication I'd seen.

What about *Spy* excited you?

I don't think of publication design in the 1980s as being particularly spectacular, and this

was a magazine that resonated with me on an editorial level as well as on a visual level. It was very stylized typography. The use of Garamond 3, Metro, and Alternate Gothic in a world that, for me, had been Franklin Gothic and Century was distinctive.

I don't want to overemphasize the point that you were a very precocious child. But did you really know the difference between type styles? The subject is often arcane even for designers.

I lived a block and a half from Sam Flax on Twentieth Street, so I bought a $6.95 catalogue of dry-transfer lettering. Initially, that was the only way of accessing information about typography. I went from there to working for a designer who rented space from Push Pin Studios, which gave me access to Seymour Chwast's library, and I got to xerox his 1923 American Type Founders book page for page. I've gradually learned more about typography in its reverse chronology—I mean, digital things and then photo things and then metal things and then typographic things and calligraphic things and so on.

You began as a generalist. When did you turn the corner toward specialization?

I created a promotion piece in 1990 with a typographic thrust—cards that I had printed letterpress, based upon articles I had found in old type catalogues. I had digitized some wood type from these and sent out the promo with the hopes of getting work in book-jacket design or album covers or lettering. People like Gail Anderson and Fred Woodward at *Rolling Stone* responded to it and hired me to do lettering work. At the same time, Roger Black was opening the Font Bureau with David Berlow—they were one of my first clients and I was one of their first employees. I began doing everything that needed to be done there for typeface work, from scanning to some outline drawing to a little bit of design. Those things evolved in parallel when I was first starting. And eventually the work I took on was entirely typographic.

How did you learn to letter?

Just keeping my eyes open, doing what seemed to make sense. I worked very closely with David Berlow when the Font Bureau was starting and learned a great deal from him, not so much about lettering but about type design, about the mechanics of designing a typeface, as distinguished from doing lettering. That was very essential.

What specifically is the difference between lettering and type design?

Well, lettering is for a single application; a typeface is for many applications. The way you go about doing a piece of lettering has to do with its art direction. The way you go about designing a typeface has to do with not knowing how it will be used.

Would you agree that the design you were doing in the early years was based on a revivalist sensibility?

It really depended on the project. Some things I was doing would involve direct digitization of existing artwork; it's very banal but technically useful. One gets a good training in typography by replicating work that's gone by. Some of it was more interpretive in ways—starting from an existing historical design. Like one of the first things I did for Roger Black was a Bodoni revival, without really knowing that a Bodoni revival was a relatively complex project to undertake. First of all, it involved sorting through historical material, finding things that were worth keeping, things that were worth putting aside, and developing some sense of what really were the qualities of Bodoni not expressly found in contemporary revivals of the face. And some projects were entirely new. I've done a

number of faces that weren't really grounded in historical continuum—in explicit ways, at least.

For example?

I did a font for the Guggenheim last year that is a set of three sans serifs. It's not specifically based in an existing style, but it is recognized for the low x-height, and so it gets collected with things like Nobel and Kabel. But I hope it doesn't have the feeling of 1930s German typography. I hope it calls to mind the Guggenheim.

That's an interesting point. Within a genre or a family or a style that is noted for or associated with a mid-century modern sensibility, how do you create a type that's functional to its own time period?

I find that really hard to articulate. It's like when I'm asked to describe why I need to design a typeface in the first place. There are a few things that I am very concerned with. One of the things I mentioned earlier is the way type families develop. I don't like to do things that are simply romans, italics, bolds, and bold italics. I'm more interested in doing families of weights or families that evolve in ways that are unconventional—typefaces that can't really be substituted for existing designs. In the case of the Guggenheim font, it was a matter of designing along a weight axis that doesn't necessarily follow the way a face like Nobel or Kabel gets heavier. It does different things. But again, it's a typeface. There are ineffable qualities about these things that make them very hard to justify. A lot of it is simply stylistic appeal.

What faces can you describe that involved pushing aside the historical precedents?

There's the Fetish family of faces. It's one of the more speculative things that I've done. You could say it's a postmodern joke on typography, but it's also a commentary on some of the things that I find curious, not necessarily objectionable, but questionable about contemporary typography. The first design, called Fetish 338, is an attempt to collect all the eccentricities that have in some way come to be associated with classicism. I am trying to take the phenomenon of art direction, which employs some of the aspects of classical typography—swatches and small caps and things from very specific typographic milieus that are divorced from those original functions and used for some other purpose—and to use some of those strategies in a typeface rather than a piece of typography, to see what comes out. And it's sort of a typeface that adjusts itself. It's overly flowered and ornamented, and it's rococo and baroque at the same time.

That's one of the faces in the series. One of them also is a sort of joke on the way typefaces are designed with specific uses in mind. It's a face called Fetish 976. It's used for telephone directories.

Incidentally, are these numbers arbitrary?

Mostly. They come from the fact that every art director I know has a favorite typeface that has a pedigree attached to it. It's always Caslon 540 or Garamond 3. The 976 prefix comes from the "fifty-cent-a-minute" information calls. And this font is designed in the way that faces like Bell Gothic or Bell Centennial are, with one specific application in mind. I think of those as being interesting designs because they both were created for telephone directories and have been used in the last few years in publications in large sizes or even in signage.

So, as quirky as it is, Fetish 976 was designed as a functional face?

It's designed in a way that it aestheticizes the function. It contains many of the aspects of use-specific typography. It has things like ink traps to allow for reproduction in small sizes on bad paper on web offset presses. But rather than using these things functionally, it aestheticizes them. It decides that the theme of the typeface will be the ink trap, and they are used in completely unnecessary ways that seem in some way technical and functional, but are in fact technically ridiculous.

To enlighten the ignorant, what is an ink trap?

In a lot of metal—I suppose both metal photo and digital types—when a typeface is meant to be used in very small sizes, it's necessary to compensate for areas where ink will otherwise collect, a corner, a junction of any two strokes, and so forth. I think one of the reasons why a typeface like Bell Centennial has become so popular in recent years is that it contains these things, which when the typeface is enlarged to 72 point become interesting. They become stylistic attributes as opposed to functional ones. So in the case of this design, I have taken a font that is obviously not intended to be used informationally in 6 point and applied to it these strange structural elements just to see what would happen, and I think the result is interesting. Unexpected things happen as a result of these two aesthetics colliding: on the one hand, the very baroque and overbaked, and on the other hand, the very specific and technical.

You call this a "speculative" typeface. Do you mean experimental?

I wrote a big manifesto about this in the first issue of what I hope will be many issues of *Muse,* my specimen book, really trying to undo the word "experimental," which I think is bandied about too much in typography.

"Experimental" tends to be an alibi sometimes. Unfortunately, it has become so married to "unusual." An experimental typeface these days tends to be one that does not look like a book typeface. It becomes a way of foreclosing the whole discussion. I read an article on one of the faces submitted to Neville Brody's *Fuse* in which the designer said that it can't be evaluated in traditional terms because it's an experimental design—which I think is a cop-out. It's either a work of design or it's a work of fine art. If it is both, I am more interested rather than less. But to make no distinction between typefaces that can be used for conveying words and typefaces that can't, muddies the field.

To get back to your speculative work, how do you define that? Is Fetish 976 a face that you feel can and should be used?

Oh, absolutely. I make no bones of the fact that it's a novelty. It doesn't have the versatility of the more sober text faces and display faces I've done. But it's certainly usable.

So, one might criticize the typographer who screws up in using the typeface? Do you see your typefaces used in ways that you would never want to see them used?

It's a sword that cuts both ways. Obviously, I'm disappointed by things that I see sometimes, and people use my work in ways that I don't think are very attentive. On the other hand, people also use my faces in ways I never expected, and it's a delight to see. The thing that I am most suspicious of is a typeface designed in a vacuum, when someone makes the font with no idea whatsoever of how it might be used.

What do you use as a proving ground? Do you use your faces in their own typographic environment?

Well, I have two main criteria in designing a typeface. First of all, I don't want to design any faces I can't imagine using myself, which is why I've obviously strayed away from certain aesthetics. Second of all, I have my clients. Most of the work I do at this point is commissioned, and I enjoy it that way. The concerns of readers are, I think, paramount, and obviously art directors are there to safeguard those concerns.

Do you go the conservative route?

Absolutely. I'm working on a new series of faces right now called Knockout. It began life as an update of Champion Gothic, one of the first type families I designed for *Sports Illustrated,* and I am now doing this new set of versions for *Sports Illustrated.* In this typeface, I am trying to both make something that is functional in a very bulletproof way—a designer who needs to do a chart can pick one of the faces and use it safely without having to think about too many things—yet also imbue it with enough character that it becomes interesting in display sizes. There are things about the style of these letters that resonates with me and that I hope comes through in both their very sober applications and their very avant-garde applications. And, certainly, I try everything before it goes out the door. It's less about quality assurance and more about enjoyment. I love playing with fonts when they're done. That's the whole point of doing them in the first place—to have them.

"Knockout" derives from boxing terminology?

The whole boxing theme came about when Champion was designed. It's a face in six different widths, and there's no real morphology that's been adopted for describing weights in that way. If the variation is in the thickness of the stem, you might say it's light, medium, bold, extra bold, whatever. But in various different widths, there are a handful of terms like "extended," "condensed," "compressed," that are not used in a uniform way. So we decided to use our own system, which is to adopt the names of the American Federation of Boxing weights. In Champion they proceed bantamweight, featherweight, lightweight, welterweight, middleweight, heavyweight. Knockout is an improvement upon that. It goes from flyweight to sumo, and so it's an extension of the same idea. And each of these nine different ideas—flyweight, bantamweight, featherweight, lightweight, welterweight, middleweight, cruiserweight, and sumo—comes in different leagues as well. So there's, for example, junior welterweight, full welterweight, and ultimate welterweight.

What is your basic attitude about reprising typefaces?

The *Rolling Stone* faces are a good example because they're not explicit revivals for testing designs. The whole family is slab serif. Obviously, it's designed along nineteenth-century lines, so it looks like something from Stephenson Black and something from Herb Lubalin. It's got a very specific style to it. But that family of designs includes, in addition to the four Victorian styles—the Egyptian, the Gothic, the Latin, and the Grecian—a set of italics for all of them, two of which, the Latin italic and the Grecian italic, never existed historically. They're mythical. And the project for me, of creating a Latin italic or a Grecian italic in ways that are historically sympathetic yet entirely new, is part of the sum of the typeface. It's a way of reinventing or reworking something–"rephrasing" is

probably a good way of putting it—in a way that's unique, and not merely rehashing what's gone before. It's also an incredible challenge. Finding ways of doing these things is what a lot of typography has been about for the last hundred years.

You have to immerse yourself in the historical precedents. How do you do it?

I buy a lot of books. I'm also a member of ATypI, and I've gone to its annual congress for the last nine years. When I began going, it was peopled largely by German manufacturers of typesetting equipment, as well as calligraphers, stonecutters, sign painters who work in gold leaf, Web designers, font hinters, and computer programmers. All these disciplines bring their own interests to bear in the design of typography, and the best thing you can do is be part of it.

Your Apple face is one that comes with all Macintoshes. That's a huge responsibility. How did you come to work with Apple?

In 1991, I met an engineer from Apple, who explained that they were working on a new technology for type, which ultimately became called TrueType GX. It was an attempt to automate a lot of the aspects of typography that are tedious: ligature insertion, smart quotes, things like that. And because my typeface Hoefler Text had a broad enough character set, since it was steeped in classical typography as opposed to digital typography—it had small caps and swatches and ligatures and old figures and all these sorts of things—it seemed a good candidate for inclusion in this project. There was a good synergy between the interests of the designers who were involved—I was one, Matthew Carter was another, the Font Bureau, and Bigelow & Holmes—and the interests of engineers in line-and-layout technologies, people like Dave Alstadt, who is one of the fathers of the technology, and Eric Maeder, both of whom brought their interests in language and their interests in technology to bear upon the work they were doing. The font for Apple Computer was a challenge in part because of its size and in part because it had to do more with satisfying engineers than with satisfying art directors, who bring a very different set of notions to the table. The engineers are not as interested in the style of letters as in the way in which they're used, the way in which they're encoded, and that was a good challenge for me as well.

There were some wonderful scenes. I was talking to one of the engineers about the way small caps are used, and saying, "Small caps *are* used; remember, all caps are distracting in postal codes or in introductions or in acronyms and so forth." And he asked what one does when setting in italics for small caps. I couldn't really find an answer besides using roman small caps, which is what Bruce Walters might have done and what Updike might have done. He asked for "italic small caps," but there simply hadn't been any historically—or there hadn't been until the digital age—so it didn't really seem worth doing them. But I couldn't find an answer out of the argument, the semantic argument "What do you do if?" except to draw them. And the result is something I would never have thought to do myself, which is now my favorite part of the typeface—the italic small caps.

In terms of your own work, give me a good example of what you consider problem solving versus window dressing.

Well, I don't intend to take on the job if it's window dressing. When I get a call from a client who says, "We want our own typeface," my first question is usually "Why?" And unless I can get a good answer, I am skeptical that the job will ever take flight, and most of them don't. A lot of it is vanity: The competition has their own typeface, and so an art director at another magazine wants one, too. If there isn't some overarching reason for me to invest the time that I put into a typeface, I don't want to do it. But if someone comes to me and says, "We need a family of sans serifs that can be used in large sizes and can be used for unusual layouts where some words might be long and they can be condensed mathematically" (as was the case for *Sports Illustrated*); or if someone says, "We need a family of faces built on the same set width so we can recycle our layout from one font to the next" (as *Rolling Stone* did); or "We need a modern typeface like Bodoni or Didot that can be in very, very large sizes and very, very small" (as *Harper's Bazaar* did), those are the intersections of the technology and the aesthetics that I think are exciting and worth exploring.

And how did you learn?

Trial-and-error, mostly.

What is your learning curve?

It's ongoing. There's not a typeface I've ever finished that I wouldn't revisit. If I had the time, I'd redo them all.

But does that mean the face is flawed?

I don't think so. If I get complaints about a typeface, obviously I'll fix it, but that's yet to happen. I think it's more that I, as I think all type designers do, bring different interests to bear upon typefaces, and those interests are ever-broadening.

As you're talking about changing this and that in the typefaces that you do, it suggests that every typeface, even our most sacrosanct typefaces, can do with a little adjustment. Would you say that's true?

Well, part of the question is, what are the sacrosanct typefaces? If someone said, "You can never improve upon Garamond," what does he mean? The metal punches made by Claude Garamond in the 1930s, or the Garamond revival they know from prototype, or any of the sixty Garamond revivals made digitally? What is that essence of Garamond-ness that is so ideal, so Platonic, and so untouchable? There really isn't one. There are aspects of every typeface that are exemplary and worthy of study, worthy of emulation in fact, but there is no perfection. There is nothing that is insurmountable.

How do you feel about the sheer number of type designers who are one-hit wonders?

I think it's great. Cheltenham is a one-shot deal. Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue was an architect who had an idea for a font one day and made it, and it's been one of the most enduring typefaces in history. Bruce Rogers did one, or two if you count Montaigne. A lot of the totemic figures in type history have been the one-shot people. And for the most part, they have not been typographers. Caslon was a gunmaker. Baskerville sold Japan ware. Typography was an ingredient in a larger commercial enterprise for all of these people, and they did some of the most enduring things. So I am delighted to see a typeface by someone I have never heard of before.

How do you respond to those who say there are enough typefaces; we don't need any more?

I think that's kind of a dumb question. I don't think anybody would say there are enough novels. So I don't really see a reason to talk about that. But at the same time, as I was trying to say earlier, I don't think more typefaces for the sake of more typefaces is a good thing.

How do you feel about the more eccentric things that are being described as experimental or quirky or weird?

Some of them are great. Some of them aren't. Anybody who has a strong idea about something and can make it manifest in typeface usually has something to say, and if the final result is something that's interesting to designers and to readers, then all the better.

Does it go back to what we were talking about earlier? Does it have to work in the real world?

I don't think it has to have any kind of fealty to the historical continuum to be good. Whether it works, who knows? Obviously, I'm partial to typefaces that can be used by designers and read by readers. But you know, everything is different. A lot of contemporary typefaces, I think, are basically lettering shoehorned into a font. They don't necessarily have a shelf life that goes beyond their one use, but that one use may be enough.

Now you're at the ripe old age of twenty-seven, having done more than most people at forty-seven. What do you want to do that you haven't done?

I'm not really sure. I feel that a lot of the things I do right now are either the very conventional faces like Knockout or the very speculative ones like Fetish, and it's very hard for me to unite those two interests: to do a face that is a critical experiment but also produces a face that's versatile in a way that the more traditional things I've done are. I'd like to get closer to marrying those two things, and I have a few ideas in mind how it might happen, but I really haven't had a chance to explore it, certainly in a commercial environment. In part, my catalogue/magazine *Muse* and the retail business are ways of funding that work and being able to take the time to invest in a typeface that may not be used by anybody.